DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 424 605 CS 509 934

AUTHOR Young, Cory
TITLE Intercultural Adaptation in the Classroom: The Ethics of Grading and Assessing Students with Minimal Proficiency in Speaking English.
PUB DATE 1998-11-00
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Communication Association (84th, New York, NY, November 20-24, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Context; *Ethics; *Foreign Students; Higher Education; *Intercultural Communication; Introductory Courses; Public Speaking; *Student Evaluation; Student Needs; Teacher Surveys
IDENTIFIERS Faculty Attitudes; *Nonnative Speakers; Sojourners

ABSTRACT

As more and more international students begin attending universities in the United States, the nature of teaching is changing. It is within this change that sojourners experience the "double whammy of intercultural adaptation." International students must learn to deal with and adjust to a completely new cultural and educational environment in which language barriers, everyday experiences, relationships with professors and peers, and a different time schedule are problems for their cultural adjustment. An exploratory study gathered data by interviewing three communication department faculty members with experience teaching international students to uncover the specific behaviors that reflect the process of adaptation and unveil potential ethical dilemmas in assessment. Questions dealt with who is responsible for intercultural adaptation; how instructors define ethics in relation to teaching; and what some of the ethical considerations are in assessing international students. All participants took a middle-of-the-road perspective, agreeing that intercultural adaptation is "everyone's" responsibility and that ethics is situational and negotiated. However, they differed in their practical day-to-day operational strategies to assist students. This preliminary study provides a space to open dialogue as to how communication faculty approach ethics, intercultural adaptation in the classroom, and the dilemmas that may surface in assessment. (Contains 18 references.) (NKA)

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ED 424 605

Intercultural Adaptation in the Classroom: The Ethics of Grading and Assessing Students with Minimal Proficiency in Speaking English

Cory Young, Doctoral Student
Department of Interpersonal Communication
Bowling Green State University
cyoung@bgnet.bgsu.edu

Paper accepted for presentation at the National Communication Association

November 20-24, 1998 New York

International and Intercultural Communication Division

CS509934

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Intercultural Adaptation in the Classroom: The Ethics of Grading and Assessing Students with Minimal Proficiency in Speaking English

Imagine this scenario. An international student enrolls in a basic speech course at a large midwestern university. As the semester progresses, it becomes apparent that the student has minimal proficiency in written and spoken English and has difficulty in delivering and writing speeches. The grading system at this particular university is created to assess students' skill at speaking and writing with the underlying assumption that everyone in the classroom has proficiency in English. But in this scenario, such criteria become problematic. How then does an instructor handle this situation? How will the instructor grade this student?

Situations like this are becoming increasingly common as the number of international students attending U. S. universities is rising. As more and more international students are integrated into the classroom, the nature of teaching is changing. It is within this change that sojourners experience the "double whammy of intercultural adaptation". Intercultural adaptation according to Chen & Starosta (1998) refers to the process by which sojourners deal with and adjust to a completely new cultural environment. Oftentimes, students and other sojourners experience a general cultural shock in which basic everyday experiences such as how to find an apartment, where to shop for groceries, how to ask for help, and where to go to meet other students create exciting and potentially troublesome situations. Simultaneously, students are adapting to their new educational environment in which language barriers, relationships with professors and peers, the process of learning, and a different time schedule are additional problems cast onto their cultural adjustment.

In addition to these two levels of intercultural adaptation, confusion exists as to whose responsibility it is to adapt. Kim (1995) believes that "the main power and responsibility for change has to reside in the stranger who, in the end, is responsible for his or her own psychological and social welfare" (p. 193). In contrast, Chen & Starosta (1998) acknowledge that "as we move toward multiculturalism and globalization, it is not only the business world that must adapt to these changes, the academic sector must deal with the trend as well" (p. 235).

Returning for a moment to the opening scenario, these tensions of culture shock and the responsibility of adaptation in the classroom collide, providing a forum for discussing pedagogical challenges and ethical implications of assessing international students. How do instructors view their responsibility in helping international students adapt? What communicative and/or pedagogical behaviors do instructors engage in to assist international students? What are the ethical implications of intercultural adaptation, especially in relation to assessment?

To answer these questions, two theoretical perspectives inform and guide this exploratory study: intercultural adaptation and the relationship between pedagogy, ethics and communication. To gather data, faculty members in a communication department who had experience teaching international students were interviewed to uncover the specific behaviors that reflect the process of adaptation and unveil potential ethical dilemmas in assessment.

Intercultural Adaptation: Theories and Research

The transition and adjustment from home to college is difficult for all students but particularly for students whose culture and value systems are so vastly different from the

host country. Oftentimes students experience tension and conflict in attempting to straddle the two cultures and, more often than not, the responsibility to develop adaptive acculturative responses falls on the shoulders of international students. But how does adaptation occur and should students be the only responsible agents for such change?

Kim & Gudykunst (1987) devoted the entire issue of the International and Intercultural Communication Annual to current approaches to intercultural (cross-cultural) adaptation. Cross-cultural adaptation in this volume was used as a general reference for the broadest understanding of how strangers adjust and encompasses similar processes of acculturation, assimilation, and adjustment. As the editor notes, "every stranger in a new culture must cope with a high level of uncertainty and unfamiliarity. The task of all cultural strangers is to acquire the necessary competence to function satisfactorily, at least at a minimal level" (p. 8).

Cross-cultural adaptation exists on many different levels, and can be measured from a multitude of directions. The various aspects and categories discussed, researched and measured included uncertainty reduction, anxiety/culture shock, changes in economic condition, perception, attitude, behavior, cognition, linguistic proficiency, and ethnic/cultural identity. Additionally, the contributing theorists focused on various demographic groups (domestically and globally) and situations in which adaptation occurs. However, none of the research addressed intercultural adaptation in the classroom.

Wiseman (1995) devoted one section of the Annual to theories on intercultural communication competence and adaptation. Almost entirely quantitative in nature, the contributing theorists proffered research on anxiety/uncertainty management, a multi-

disciplinary approach to studying intolerance, a differential demand model for sojourner adjustment, accommodation theories, conversational constraints, cross-cultural adaptation, and expectancy violation theory. One article in particular, "Cross-cultural adaptation: An integrative theory", provides a useful framework for this study. Kim (1995) developed this theory to focus on the process, an explanation of the process, and key factors that influence adaptation. Within this framework, Kim also identifies the types of communicative behaviors-- personal, social, affective, cognitive and operational-- that are exhibited in intercultural interactions. Additionally, she recognizes the negotiated, processual, and dynamic nature of adaptation in discussing the different phases that sojourners, not host individuals, experience. However, adaptation was conceptualized as a universal phenomenon across situations and contexts and therefore failed to account for specific contexts and any ethical implications that may arise.

The Intricacies of Pedagogy, Ethics, and Communication

Ethics is a contested term, fueling intense philosophical debates among various scholars and within numerous educational departments. This one term demarcates the rightness or wrongness of decisions the moral foundations of a people's character, the "sermonic" dimension of language (Weaver, 1971; Burke, 1957; 1965; 1966), what is the greatest good for the greatest number, whether a behavior is a means to an end or an end to a mean, the nature of rhetoric and whether ethical behaviors are cultural universal, or relative to each individual. Within the field of communication, these different perspectives have informed and shaped the nature of communication in and of itself (i.e. freedom of speech and expression) and the contents of courses in public speaking, interpersonal and small group, rhetoric, intercultural and interethnic communication.

Anderson (1990), in discussing ethical issues in relation to communication pedagogy, argues that

> The communication classroom shares the concern of every classroom about cheating on exams, plagiarized material, fairness in grading, and ensuring responsible use of individual rights. But the teacher who also deals with communication theory and practice inevitable also faces issues that arise out of the subject matter: ethical communication goals; acceptable ethical practices in treatment of content, language use . . . and development of an adequate basis for making communication decisions in one's profession, community activity, and private life. (p. 460).

Additionally, questions concerning grading criteria, requirements for assignments, favoritism, instructor biases and prejudices, teacher-student relationships, individual versus institutional practices, universal and relative definitions of ethics, and different cultural backgrounds will be raised in the classroom. The mutual influence of all these contextual factors is vital to understanding the ethical dimension of making decisions and judgments when assessing students, especially international students.

In relation to assessment, numerous universal guidelines and criteria exist as to how to assess students ethically. Salvia & Ysseldyke (1995) and Fisch (1996) outline general legal/ethical considerations including: fairness, confidentiality of students' academic and personal information, self-reflexivity of one's own values, biases, and limitations, adherence to individual university or disciplinary standards for assessment, and prescriptions as to how to make moral and ethical decisions. Vangelisti (1990) specifies for communication scholars the criteria of validity, reliability, cost, ratings on

evaluations, and the use of multiple measures to be employed in evaluating whether an instructor is assessing ethically. Inherently problematic in this literature is the reliance on superficial prescriptions for maintaining ethical standards. What happens when those ethical standards are called into question and challenged? Or, what happens when those standards are unevenly applied?

This is a particularly salient concern for minority and international students. Placier (1993) argues that "conflicts about grades are aspects of fundamental conflicts about the individual, culture, society, the purposes of education and the instructor's role in socializing students . . . grades are context bound phenomena [As such,] it is important to describe the context in which . . . grading decisions are made" (p. 3). Barna (1979) in discussing ethics in the context of intercultural communication education questions whether it is "ethical for instructors to enforce their own classroom standards and specific learning behaviors on students who find them alien and difficult" (p. 7). An example provided is a scenario in which a public speaking instructor castigates a student from another country for pounding on the podium and speaking in an manner appropriate for public speech in his/her country. Barna implies that a dialectic tension exists as "students have elected to come to a foreign country to study and learn new ways . . . [and] should be the ones to adapt" (p. 8). And yet, "A wise instructor will realize, however, that students as well as instructors are encapsulated by their own cultural ways. The students often do know what is expected, only that they are "wrong". What they need is someone to recognize their difficulties and help them adjust" (p. 8).

The ethical principle inherent in this dialectical tension is what I deem to be the morality of ethnocentrism. Professors, in accepting responsibility to teach, are in a

position to depart with knowledge specific to their course. But this knowledge is centered in a particular culture, with a particular perspective, and within particular educational institutions that have specific ideologies and procedures for assessment. Do instructors then have a moral obligation (or responsibility) to adapt their course content to accommodate for viewpoints, cultures, and educational ideologies/practices that "exist on the margins"? For as Johannesen (1983) argues "some measure of adaptation in language choice, supporting materials, organization, and message transmission to reflect the specific nature of the audience is a crucial part of successful communication." (p. 5). Or are the students morally obliged to adopt to their host culture and learn its particular viewpoint, as the literature in cross-cultural adaptation suggests? Where do instructors (and students) draw the line, and how can this moral issue be resolved ethically?

A second consequence that needs consideration is what I call the ethics of inequitable assessment. Barna poses a

> controversial question, and possibly and ethical one, under the subject of classroom practices, [of] whether it is wise to use a double standard for grading. Many international students or minority ethnic students demand it, but others resent the patronizing implication of this. Some students admit to using the tendency of more than a few instructors to give them full credit and good grades just because 'they can't be expected to do as well as the others' as a reason to avoid the challenges of greater improvement. A different approach is to give respect, consideration and help to the student with special problems during the term but hold to same intellectual skill achievement standards for all. (Barna, 1979, p. 10).

In this scenario, the problem of a double standard for grading is constructed as a problem the "other" inhabits (i.e. their unethical behavior for "demanding" fair treatment). In reality, what is unethical is not being cognizant of (and/or sensitive to) the particular criteria developed for grading. Why is there a need for a double standard in the first place? Perhaps the need is created because the "intellectual skill and achievement standards for all" excludes international (or minority students) and renders those standards inequitable when assessing "others"?

O'Rourke (1993) acknowledges this dilemma in grading non-native speakers of English and proposes some "questions to consider" (p. 57). Such questions create an open dialogue for instructors and administrators to discuss these murky ethical concerns that educators have in assessing international students. While on the surface these questions appear to solve the dilemma, the questions are specific to Business Communication courses in a graduate MBA program. The special concerns of other communication courses, and undergraduate students need to be taken into consideration. Therefore, O'Rourke's questions will be used as the basis for the interviews to be conducted in this exploratory study. The questions will be modified to fit communication scholars who teach courses other than Business communication and who teach undergraduate students as well.

Three Perspectives from Communication Instructors

In regards to interviewing, Denzin & Lincoln (1998) assert that interviewing as a methodological instrument "is a conversation, the art of asking questions and listening. It is not a neutral tool, for the interviewer creates the reality of the interview situation" (p. 36). Since little research has been conducted combining these perspectives, I wanted to

use in-depth structured interviews as a way to start a conversation, a dialogue, about these issues. Using Orouke's queries as a springboard, I created questions (Appendix B) for this study based on three areas: (1) Who is responsible for intercultural adaptation?; (2) How do instructors define ethics in relation to teaching?; and (3) What are some ethical considerations in assessing international students?

The three participants in this study were chosen because of their experience and/or interest in teaching international students. All are from the same department of a mid-sized midwestern university. Two of the instructors are female, one instructor is a non-native to the United States, and one is Cherokee. And all agreed to be audiotaped. Based on the transcriptions of the interviews, the interviews yielded the following insights.

As stated in the beginning, the literature in regards to cross-cultural adaptation is conflictual and dialectical and narrowly defines adaptation. For the three communication scholars interviewed, all took a middle-of-the-road perspective, arguing that intercultural adaptation is <u>everyone's</u> responsibility. One female instructor framed her answer from a systems perspective:

> I see myself, because of my [intercultural] research interests, a facilitator, both for the student who is international, but also for the U.S. student who has very little contact [with others] . . . so, my responsibility has been to both populations in my classes to discuss the issues of what peoples' rules are and that there are different perspectives and that it takes both sides . . . And there are so many organizational and bureaucratic impacts that are not being addressed that I remain as fairly ineffectual because I can't speak for my peers, I can't speak for the other students. And any cultural adaptation

> training must be two ways. So that the university as a system, the staff, the faculty and administrators and undergraduate students should have participation.

For her, responsibility for intercultural adaptation is holistic. Each individual part within an educational system must contribute to the process.

Another instructor related a story in which an international student's parents had purchased a gift for her because their son was in danger of failing her course. Rather than make the decision alone as to whether to accept the gift, she consulted colleagues who were of the same nationality as the student, the chair of her department and the dean of the college as to how to best handle the situation. Even though she did not accept the gift, she was able to adjust her response to the parents and the student in a culturally sensitive and appropriate manner, thus allow them to save face. The non-native male instructor spoke of his students adjusting to his standards, but also allowing himself the flexibility to give students "breaks" when the material was difficult or when they couldn't "necessarily master the nuances of those kind of issues which is what you look for in development and growth of student performance".

When asked about what constitutes pedagogical ethics, each person agreed that ethics is situational and negotiated, but differed in the practical day-to-day operationalizations. In relation to students with minimal proficiency in English, one instructor believes that ethically it is not the instructor's responsibility to teach students English because then, "your job description has changed". In a public speaking course specifically, proficiency needs "to be assumed. If you don't have the proficiency, [the student] shouldn't be in the class". However, as the non-native instructor observes, ethics

is "a personal and professional judgment . . . something you assess with every individual. As a teacher you make those judgments all the time. [you] give students breaks. That is where the ethical issue lies, that moment of contact, where indiscreet transgressions can be bad, or sensible intrusions might be warranted . . . sort of a Frierian involvement, engagement" with the students.

Ethics can also be defined by the responsibilities one assumes as an educator, which include "giving information and structure that allows different learners to have different access, that I am knowledgeable enough that I can direct them to sources if I am unaware of the details myself, and that I participate in helping them develop critical thinking skills". For each class, this instructor assesses who is in the class, their comfort level and their physical and cultural differences, and adjusts her activities accordingly.

Ethics is also believed to be a personal and social characteristic that each person inhabits, and "is a negotiated relational kind of dynamic . . . [P]robably I have the same sense of fairness of right and wrong, but because . . . there are different definitions, I abide by what I think is right so that my way of teaching and their way of learning is negotiated in such a way that we are both getting what is our fair right".

These definitions of ethics are particularly salient in relation to assessing the work of international students. All interviewees agreed that using a sliding scale or double standard and/or lowering the standard or changing criteria were not a professional options. Simultaneously, however, they were sensitive to the students' situations and employed various cognitive, affective, and operational strategies (Kim, 1995, p. 181) to assist their students. Cognitive behaviors include capacities to understand another's language, culture, worldview, and rules. Affective behaviors are emotional and

empathetic behaviors. Operational behaviors help a person "chose a 'right' combination of verbal and nonverbal behaviors so as to achieve a smooth and harmonious interface . . ." (p. 181).

The non-native instructor would strategically use the student's language in class or reference something from a particular culture as a way of greeting the class or emphasizing a point. This, he contended, created "a sense of comfort, a sense of identity, a sense of belonging and familiarity" for the students. One of the female instructors was operational in assisting her students, inviting them to her office to discuss papers or asking them if there were other ways they would learn the material or take the tests. The instructor who is Cherokee would often invoke her own experiences in the hopes of inviting "others" to share their experiences. One student in particular had difficulty calling her Doctor as he was from the Middle East. So, together they negotiated the title of Sister for her, which is an appropriate address in his country. Other strategies included allowing dictionaries in class, time extensions for test, extensions of deadlines for essays, and taking alternative tests.

Implications and Conclusions

What is inherent in the literature on cross-cultural adaptation, ethics and pedagogy is the lack of connection between these perspectives. Intercultural adaptation is conceptualized as a general universal phenomenon, stripped of specific contexts and ethical implications. The literature on ethics and pedagogy offers sweeping, general concerns, but ignores specific ethical issues in assessing minority and international students. This is problematic as each university or college, each department, each classroom, and each instructor will experience intercultural adaptation in the classroom

differently, and will be exposed to unique ethical considerations given the specific contexts within which they teach. What is most important in this preliminary study is threading these perspectives together using modified questions from O'Rourke's case study, thus providing a space to open dialogue as to how communication faculty in particular approach ethics, intercultural adaptation in the classroom, and the dilemmas that may surface in assessment.

As such, this study has the potential for building theory. Thompson (1995) notes that "midrange theoretical perspectives provide insight into limited behaviors or behaviors in specific contexts. Scholars then build upon those theories to increase the extent of our understanding" (p. 698). Such research, according to Hill, Lakey, Norton & Shaver (1993), additionally has the potential for informing and guiding the development of ethical guidelines for educational institutions, especially in relation to graduate and professional development seminars.

Despite these benefits, the outcomes of this study are not finite and should be taken with a measure of caution. Several limitations to this study are worth mentioning. First, the number of faculty members interviewed was not sufficient to provide any conclusive evidence of the scope of this issue. Second, because all faculty members were from the same department, divergent institutional and departmental conceptualizations of ethics, assessment, and pedagogical responsibilities to international students are not available. Increasing the number of faculty members and educational institutions would ensure a more balanced view. Third, after the interviews, I became cognizant of the potential personal and controversial nature of ethics that may have made the respondents less willing to discuss their positions while being audio-taped. Perhaps conducting a

survey, distributed through the mail, would reduce resistance and afford greater confidentiality and anonymity of the participant's identities. A fourth and final limitation is the scope of the research. Instructors are only one part of the equation in assessing students. Such a pedagogical practice is not a monolithic activity as the interviewees suggested. Administrators, international students, and organizational policies inform and influence the evaluation of students. Treating assessment as a systematic, holistic phenomenon would be more appropriate and would yield richer, useful information.

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